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Syria: Assad and the Peace Process

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Syria: Assad and the Peace Process

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [] Office
of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was
coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. []

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directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESAs,

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**Syria: Assad and the
Peace Process**

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Key Judgments*Information available
as of 21 October 1988
was used in this report.*

Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad retains an almost singlehanded ability to undermine movement toward a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Assad does not oppose in principle a peaceful resolution to the 40-year conflict with Israel, but he is determined to block any peace initiative that does not fully consider Syrian interests—particularly the return of the Golan Heights—or attempts to circumvent Damascus. To this end, Assad is prepared to intimidate Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), or provoke Israel, in a manner that would stalemate progress toward a political settlement not to his liking.

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Assad believes time is on the side of the Arabs in the struggle with Israel. Assad faces little, if any, internal pressure to make peace with Israel or to go to war. He believes Syrian and Arab demographic advantages ultimately will tip the strategic balance in their favor.

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Assad deeply mistrusts US motives in pursuing the peace process. He is unwilling to actively pursue a political settlement because he believes unconditional US support for Israel prevents the satisfactory resolution of Arab demands. Assad is seeking a prearranged deal in which territorial concessions to Syria are agreed upon before negotiations. For Assad, the actual negotiating process would be to determine the means of implementation. In Assad's view, the inability of the United States to obtain a unified response from Israel supporting the peace process and a commitment on territorial concessions has reduced pressure on Damascus to compromise its hardline position.

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Syria's conditions for ending the state of war with Israel include full and unconditional Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in June 1967. In Syria's view, if this condition was met, the state of war could be replaced by an absence of hostilities—but not normalization of Syrian-Israeli relations. We believe Assad is prepared to make guarantees concerning Israel's security, such as demilitarization of the Golan and the assignment of an international observer force to the area, but his version of peace does not include diplomatic or commercial relations.

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Damascus has consistently upheld the right of all Palestinians in the diaspora to return to their homes and thus has not endorsed the idea of a West Bank-Gaza Strip state. Syria has carefully avoided specific formulations for Palestinian statehood, stating that the Palestinians themselves must determine what constitutes a satisfactory solution.

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Assad, nonetheless, will take whatever steps he believes are necessary to prevent the Palestinians—especially Yasir Arafat's PLO—from negotiating on their own because he fears they would ignore Syrian interests. Assad wants to control the PLO and direct it to Syrian interests. Assad probably would be flexible on the Palestinian question provided that its resolution was accepted by other Arab states and the final configuration of a Palestinian entity did not diminish Syria's preeminent political role. [REDACTED]

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Assad will not compromise on the demand for the return of the Golan Heights to full Syrian sovereignty. We doubt, however, that a quick grab for the Golan—even as a Sadat-style tactic to break the political impasse and start negotiations—is likely within the next two years. Assad would prefer to settle the conflict with Israel by means short of war and, in our judgment, the defensive element continues to dominate Assad's strategic thinking. He may be gambling that the growing Syrian military threat—particularly the development of chemical weapons—will prompt the United States to “deliver” Israel into a peace process on Arab terms. [REDACTED]

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Assad intends to avoid negotiating with Israel for as long as possible in the belief that Syria's long-range strategic position will improve. Assad sees the state of no-war/no-peace as conducive to his efforts to develop Syria's military arsenal and maximize Damascus's regional influence, which stems principally from Syria's role as the sole confrontation state with Israel. In his view, Israeli concessions will not be forthcoming until Syria strengthens its negotiating hand by achieving strategic parity. Assad believes that Israel has no incentive to make peace with the Arabs given its military strength and unswerving US support. [REDACTED]

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Despite obstacles that Assad perceives as limiting prospects for a process he finds acceptable, he fears being left out. Assad probably would attend an international conference, if only to sabotage the talks. Under almost any circumstances, Assad will have viable tactics to undermine moves toward peace that threaten Syrian interests. He has successfully demonstrated his ability in the past to use subversion, military force, terrorism, and assassination to this end. [REDACTED]

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Scope Note

This Research Paper is based primarily on an examination of Syria's official statements over many years. Careful study of such material, in our view, provides rich insights into Syrian policy.



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Syria: Assad and the Peace Process

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New Tactical Flexibility . . . Within Rigid Limits

Despite occasional signals that Damascus may be ready to consider peace with Israel, we do not believe that Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad will agree to join in diplomatic negotiations unless he has guarantees from the United States that the Golan Heights will be restored to Syria. In early 1987, Assad appeared to soften his hardline position toward the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict when he affirmed in a meeting with former President Jimmy Carter Syria's commitment to a diplomatic solution of the 40-year-old dispute. In the April 1987 meeting, Assad hinted for the first time that face-to-face talks with Israel might be necessary. Assad also publicly endorsed Soviet calls for an international conference to end the conflict. In 1988, Assad met with US envoys on several occasions to discuss the most recent US peace initiative. Syria strongly criticized US proposals but did not explicitly reject the process as it had in the past. Nevertheless, we believe Assad's relative moderation was largely tactical, reflecting Syria's political isolation—including problems with Moscow—and economic difficulties that were eroding Syria's ability to confront Israel militarily.

Soviet policy in the Middle East has been a factor shaping Assad's recent tactics toward the peace issue. Although Soviet and Syrian views on a settlement are similar, they do not coincide on some aspects of Palestinian representation and final status. Damascus is determined, however, to play down these differences. New Soviet activism in the region, particularly Gorbachev's efforts to improve ties to moderate Arabs and Israel, appear to have made Assad less willing to offend his principal benefactor. Despite longstanding strains in the relationship, Assad appears confident that the Soviets will not require him to compromise his basic objectives. We see his endorsement of Soviet peace proposals as little more than a cost-free means to curry favor with Gorbachev. Assad may feel that by signing on to the Soviet peace initiative—he previously endorsed Soviet peace proposals in 1981

and 1984—Moscow will reduce pressure on Damascus to adjust its negative policy toward the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), or perhaps increase Soviet generosity on military and aid issues.

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Although Assad has taken a somewhat less belligerent public stance toward the peace process, we do not believe he personally is capable of a dramatic move toward peace as was President Sadat of Egypt. Assad cannot ignore the fact that the modern state of Israel was created out of historical and geographic "Greater Syria." Moreover, Assad is committed to the resolution of the Palestinian problem and will not jettison the Palestinian cause to regain lost Syrian territory.

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Assad's public statements and private comments to US officials and other observers indicate he fervently believes that the Arabs have been victimized by Israel and that the expansion of its borders during four wars is indicative of Israel's quest to fulfill a "manifest destiny." Assad harps on what he perceives as the flagrant injustice inflicted on the Arabs by the creation of the Jewish state. Assad recognizes that, after 40 years, avenging this offense is not immediately possible. Nonetheless, he is resolved to restore Arab honor by extracting concessions from the Israeli state. This effort virtually has become Assad's political *raison d'être* and the foundation of his political legitimacy.

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Despite Assad's personal intensity over the conflict with Israel, there appears to be little, if any, pressure within Syria to resolve the issue either through war or a negotiated settlement. According to the US Embassy in Damascus, several factors contribute to making Syria's position different from that of Egypt or Jordan. Less land and fewer people in Syria are affected by Israeli occupation, and the roughly 300,000 Palestinians in Syria see little hope that a territory for

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Evolving Confrontation Tactics

While attempting to achieve a credible military option, Assad has pursued the confrontation with Israel since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 through several tactics short of war. The success of Syrian-backed terrorist operations in undermining US and Israeli policy in Lebanon from 1982 to 1984—such as the assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel—and Syrian complicity in others—like the bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut in April 1983—encouraged Damascus to repeat these tactics elsewhere. During 1985, Syria sponsored several martyrdom operations intended to kill Israelis and their surrogates in the security zone in Lebanon. In 1986, Syrian tactics took a dramatic leap in terms of risk, as Syrian intelligence planned two spectacular terrorist operations to blow up Israeli jetliners in Europe. International disapprobation following the discovery of Syria's direct involvement in terrorism has forced Assad since then to resort to more "traditional" means of confronting Israel through support for guerrilla operations, carried out under the rubric of national liberation struggle.

Although some of these methods appear prudent as an alternative to war, each carries considerable political and military risk. Each also appears to embody what the US Embassy has described as Assad's fascination with martyrdom and his belief that in the face of overwhelming odds nothing is more noble than risk that entails self-sacrifice.

During 1985, a number of martyrdom operations were carried out in the Israeli security zone of southern Lebanon by young Arabs attempting to unnerve and shame the Israeli occupiers into retreat. Syria recruited and trained most of the volunteers and exploited each operation for maximum propaganda value. None of the martyrs succumbed without associating his or her name with Assad's. The US Embassy in Damascus reported that each martyr's name was spread across Syrian newspapers, their names were put on signs displayed above Syrian

schools, and each was given at least 15 minutes of prime-time television, including a prerecorded last testament and an exhortation to join the Arab struggle against Zionism.

The military value of these operations, launched against checkpoints jointly manned by Israeli soldiers and members of the Army of South Lebanon, was marginal. Most of the dead and wounded were innocent Lebanese bystanders. Resentment among the local population over this fact probably was the main reason the campaign was dropped, although a lack of "volunteers"—a would-be martyr captured by the Israelis claimed he was blackmailed into participating—might have crippled the program. Nonetheless, the Embassy noted, each operation allowed the Syrian regime to trumpet its chosen path of confrontation, as opposed to negotiation, with Israel. The Embassy also presumed a hope by the regime that these operations would have a demonstration effect in the occupied territories, "possibly sparking similar incidents of self-immolation on the West Bank."

In 1986, Syria abandoned martyrdom operations in southern Lebanon in favor of terrorism on the European stage. Damascus was directly implicated in two attempts to bomb El Al airliners in Europe, one at London's Heathrow Airport in April 1986, and another in June in Madrid. We believe the decision to attack the El Al jets almost certainly was taken at the highest levels of the Syrian Government. Although we cannot confirm Assad's personal culpability, we believe these operations fell within guidelines established by the President.

Syria's rationale for the attacks has never been clear. We believe Damascus most likely was attempting to avenge Israel's intercept the previous February of the Libyan jet returning senior Syrian Ba'ith Party officials to Damascus and Israel's apparently unprovoked downing in Syrian airspace of two Syrian

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MIGs in November 1985. [redacted]

[redacted] *On a strategic level, Assad may have viewed such an operation as a component of the psychological war against Israel that would demonstrate the ability of Israel's enemies to exploit its vulnerabilities. From a Syrian perspective, spectacular acts of terrorism against Israeli interests would help to undermine the invincible image earned by Israel as a result of its stunning military victories over the Arabs during the last four decades.* [redacted]

Caught redhanded in the El Al attempts, Syrian officials became concerned about the political, economic, and military consequences of being linked to international terrorism. Syria dramatically lowered its profile in international terrorism and has not been implicated in terrorist operations outside the Middle East since June 1986. [redacted]

Sobered by the fallout from his terrorist ventures against Israel, Assad appears to have returned for the time being to more traditional means of confrontation. Several incidents carried out during the past two years by Syrian-supported groups indicate that Damascus is selectively pursuing its regional political agenda through guerrilla and terrorist raids. The Palestinian hang-glider attack against an Israeli military outpost in November 1987 is the most dramatic example to date that Syria continues to sanction operations against Israel and its surrogates. [redacted]

[redacted] *Damascus has sought to avoid charges of sponsoring international terrorism, however, by referring to these operations as legitimate acts of national liberation struggle.* [redacted]

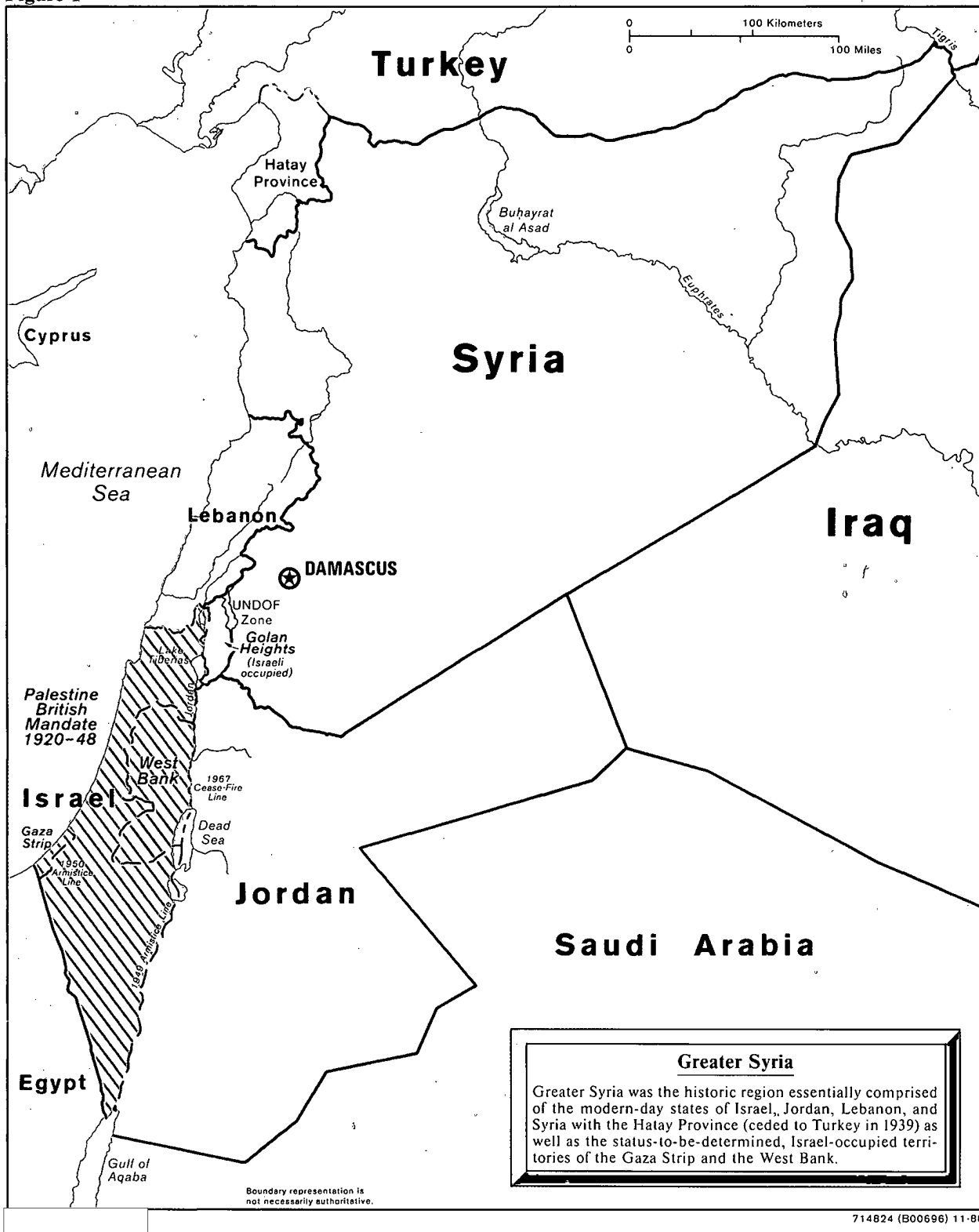
peace deal will benefit them as most are 1948 refugees. A less tangible consideration is that few people in the ruling circles of Syria have family, political, or ethnic roots in the Golan. The Embassy notes that Syria is not cycling into leadership positions people whose attitudes and perceptions are shaped by direct identification with the occupied territories. [redacted]

In the near term, Assad seems confident there is little danger that he will be forced to negotiate with his Israeli nemesis. Syrian commentaries reflect their expectation that movement toward an international conference will founder because, in Syria's view, Israeli political leaders are not really interested in peace. [redacted] the inability of the United States to obtain a unified response from the Israelis supporting the peace process has reduced pressure on Syria to compromise positions or agree to modify calls for guarantees in advance of negotiations for the return of territories occupied in 1967. Assad can continue to meet with high-level US officials and articulate his desire for an eventual accord, [redacted] knowing that actual delivery on these promises will not become an issue. [redacted]

[redacted] We believe, moreover, that Syrian officials expect a loss of political dynamism in American peace efforts during the change in the US administration. [redacted]

More important, [redacted] Assad believes time is on his side and that the strategic balance between Damascus and Tel Aviv ultimately will shift in Syria's favor. In public and private discussions he frequently cites historical examples of steadfastness and patience as the sine qua non for shaking off the yoke of former occupiers. In the long run, Assad believes Israel cannot win. In a meeting with US officials earlier this year, Assad said the Israelis would have to accelerate their movement toward peace or be swallowed up by the Arabs. He noted that Syria's population increases by 500,000 each year and remarked that every six years "we give

Figure 1



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Assad's View of Israel

Consistently cool and calculating in his political decision making toward Israel, Assad's speeches reveal a personal reaction to the Jewish state that is visceral and vitriolic. In meetings with foreign officials and in his public statements, Assad harps on the Israeli threat to the Arabs and of "unlimited Zionist ambitions" toward Arab land and wealth. Despite his limited knowledge of Judaism, Assad treats traditional Jewish texts such as the Torah as blueprints for current Israeli political action. Assad is convinced that Israel believes its divinely given borders cover all the territory between the Nile and the Euphrates. He constantly—and mistakenly—asserts to visitors that this statement of blatant territorial ambition is engraved on the walls of the Israeli Knesset building.

In a speech celebrating the end of Ramadan in May 1988, for example, Assad told his audience:

The ambitions of racist Zionism are as clear as the sun. . . . This is clear in the Zionist books and precepts. They do not want Palestine alone or a piece of land here or there. They do not want only another Arab country. They want the land from the Nile to the Euphrates. . . . It is repeated several times in their precepts. They want Israel's state from the Nile to the Euphrates to impose their hegemony beyond that until it covers the entire world.

In a speech in 1987, Assad asserted that the Torah "mentions the peoples to be expelled from their lands and houses" and to be "enslaved and exploited." On another public occasion, Assad said that Israelis believe that their God had granted them the land between the Nile and the Euphrates and that this land was a trust around their necks that they must safeguard. "On this basis," said Assad, "they feel guilty as long as they do not liberate all this territory."

Assad believes that Israel continues its quest to fulfill its destiny not only through war, which has produced

dramatic expansions in its territory, but also through guile—for example, its quest for "secure" borders. Former President Carter recounts an exchange he had with Assad on the issue of Israel's need for secure borders. Assad ridiculed the concept in the face of modern missiles, airplanes, and other weapons. Carter quotes Assad:

It is strange to insist on secure borders on other people's territory. The Israelis claim that they took the Golan to protect their settlements, but then they built new settlements on the Golan, some of them only 300 meters from our territory! Why should secure borders be 50 kilometers from Damascus but 350 kilometers from Tel Aviv?

Assad's memory holds a catalogue of Israeli offenses, especially those he sees as terrorism. In a speech in November 1986 the US Embassy commented that Assad's indictment of Israeli "terrorism" ranged from the Vanunu and Dikko kidnappings to assassinations of Palestinians in Europe and the Middle East.^a He also listed acts of Israeli espionage carried out on American soil against the United States, including the theft of uranium from Pennsylvania, the Pollard case, the smuggling of krytron switches, and an alleged statement by former CIA official George Carver that US secrets reach the Israeli Embassy at the "speed of light."

^a Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli nuclear technician who disclosed information about Israel's nuclear program to a London newspaper, allegedly was abducted from Europe by Israeli intelligence in September 1986 and returned to Israel. Israeli authorities initially denied knowledge of Vanunu's whereabouts. Eventually his detention in Israel was acknowledged, but the means by which he was returned to Israel were never revealed. Vanunu was tried in secret and in March 1988 was convicted of treason and espionage. Former Nigerian Minister and opposition figure Umaru Dikko fled into exile when the Nigerian military overthrew the civilian government of Dikko's brother-in-law in late December 1983. Dikko, who was accused of corruption by the military regime, was abducted from London in July 1984 by Nigerian authorities collaborating with three Israelis, described in press accounts as mercenaries. British security officials discovered Dikko, drugged and packed inside a wooden crate marked diplomatic baggage, at Stansted Airport, north of London.

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Figure 2. In an interview in September 1985, Assad stated that "Israel has always rejected and continues to reject peace with the Arabs collectively. It resorts to hunting the Arabs one by one because this leads to the dismemberment of the Arab nation and this, in turn, further weakens the Arabs and places them in a capitulatory position vis-a-vis Israeli schemes."

birth to a new Israel." ¹ More fundamental to Assad's view is a conviction the Embassy believes is shared by many Syrians that there are deep internal contradictions in Israeli society, which may fracture the Jewish state. [redacted]

Assad is a patient man and firmly convinced that over time the strategic balance will shift in favor of the Arabs. He often mentions that the Crusades lasted 200 years before the Arabs threw off the European yoke. The Embassy also cites other factors that contribute to his patience: Assad does not have the domestic political requirements for an Arab-Israeli peace and does not suffer the immediate hardship of the Palestinians. Moreover, Arab nationalism is a real factor in Syrian politics, according to the Embassy, and is an area where Assad has a constituency—many Syrians want peace, but the terms must be acceptable. [redacted]

The Syrian Bottom Line—Palestine and the Golan Heights

Assad has been outspoken in his opposition to what he sees as the divide and conquer tactics of the Camp David process and is determined to prevent it from going forward. If there is a peace process, it must not consist of a series of bilateral negotiations that amount to capitulation to Israel, Assad says, but should emerge from a united Arab stand that will compel Israel to make peace on Arab terms. [redacted]

¹ Syria's population increases by 3.7 percent a year—one of the highest birthrates in the world. [redacted]

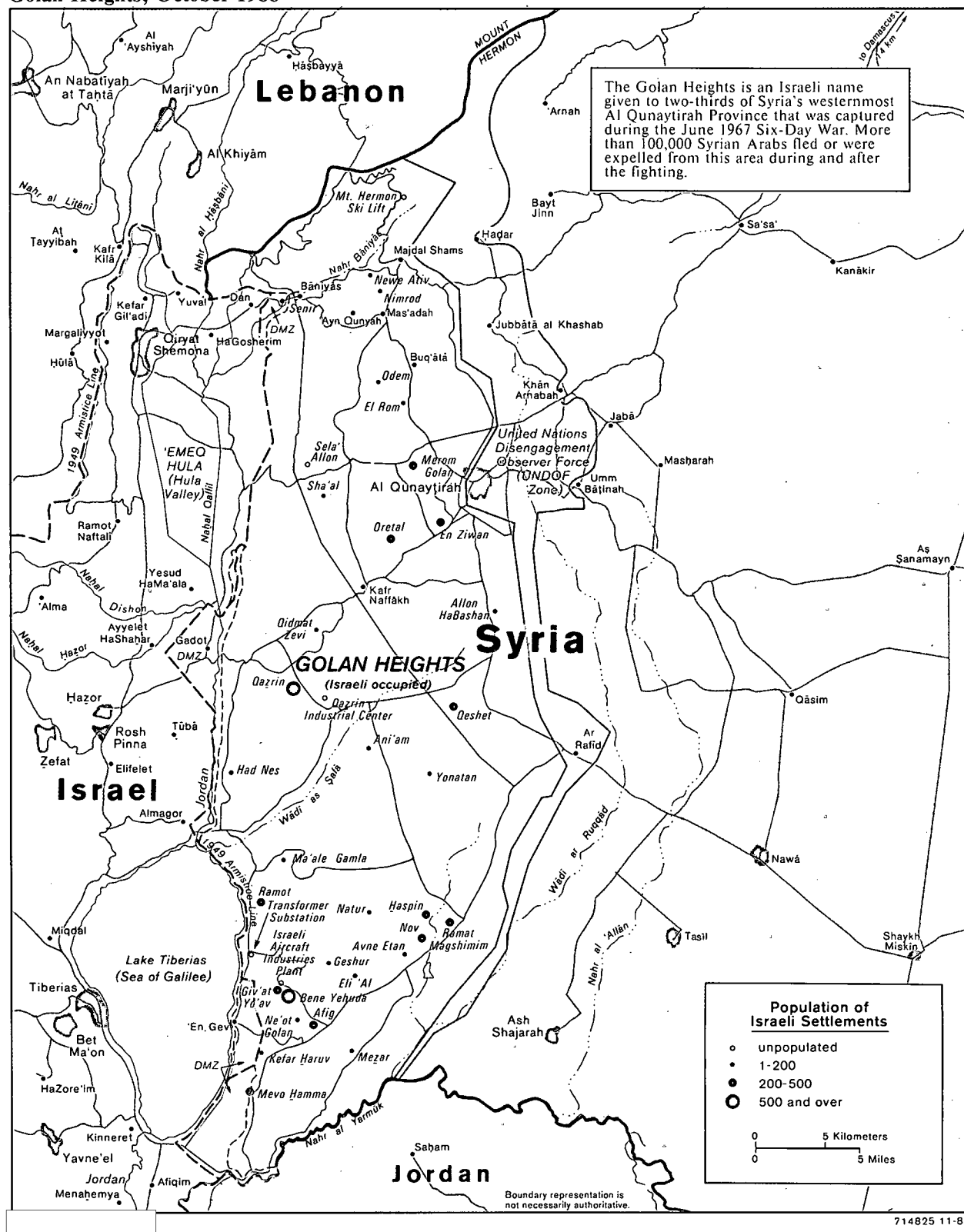
The Crusades: A Lesson for All Time

Assad publicly has stated his belief that the Crusades are "the most prominent and most impressive event in Arab and world history." Moreover, he believes the failure of the Crusaders to establish a permanent European presence in the region provides an eternally valid model for confrontation with the West. It is within the context of the Crusaders' defeat that Assad views the conflict with Israel. In his Revolution Day speech last March, Assad noted that following the Crusader onslaught, the Arabs could not liberate their land "in one year, 10 years, 20 years, or 30 years." But, he goes on, "we stood fast and struggled until we achieved the goal of liberation 200 years after the invasion began. Victory was achieved against the only superpower in the world at that time." Assad then rhetorically asked his listeners, "Where is the difficulty in confronting Israel compared with the difficulty in confronting all of Europe?" [redacted]

Syria's conditions for an end to the state of war with Israel include full and unconditional Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in June 1967, including the Golan Heights and Arab Jerusalem, and the recognition of the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to national self-determination. In Syria's view, if these conditions were met, the state of war could be replaced by an absence of hostilities—nonbelligerency—but not normalization of Syrian-Israeli relations. During meetings with US officials over several years, Assad has indicated that all aspects of the Golan issue are negotiable except that of Syrian sovereignty. On the basis of these comments, we believe Assad is prepared to make guarantees concerning Israel's security. Assad also has made it clear, however, that his version of peace does not include diplomatic or commercial relations. [redacted]

In deference to the 750,000 Palestinians living in Syria and Lebanon—most of whom are from areas that are part of Israel proper—Damascus has upheld the right of all Palestinians in the diaspora to return

Figure 3
Golan Heights, October 1988



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to their homes and thus has not endorsed the idea of a West Bank-Gaza ministate. The Embassy reports that Syrian propaganda has focused on solving the Palestinian issue while avoiding specific formulations for Palestinian statehood. Although Damascus says the Palestinians themselves must determine what constitutes a satisfactory solution, the Embassy notes that Assad, in fact, does not like the idea of a Palestinian state because it would undermine his ability to manage the conflict with Israel and reduce Syria's regional influence. []

We believe Assad would be flexible on the Palestinian question provided that its resolution was accepted by other Arab states and the final configuration of a Palestinian entity established Syria's preeminent political influence. Assad certainly would, in the early stages, continue to insist on complete evacuation of the occupied territories including East Jerusalem. The Embassy suspects, however, that with Soviet encouragement, Assad would agree to reasonable border adjustments in the context of a total package. []

In our view, Assad will not allow the Palestinians to negotiate on their own because he fears they will ignore Syrian interests. Assad's suspicions that PLO Chairman Arafat intends to pursue a separate peace were rekindled in June 1988 when Arafat's official spokesman circulated a paper at the Algiers summit meeting calling for a political settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the document drafted by Bassam Abu Sharif was not sanctioned by the PLO Executive Committee or signed by Arafat, it revived Assad's concerns that a settlement excluding Syria could end the peace process and mean that Syria's demand for the return of the Golan was unlikely to be addressed short of war. []

Following the appearance of the Abu Sharif document, Damascus immediately stepped up its campaign to weaken the PLO militarily and politically by renewing its military assault on Arafat's supporters in Beirut. In July fighters from Abu Musa's dissident Fatah faction succeeded in driving the PLO out of its strongholds in the Shatila and Burj al Barajinah refugee camps in Beirut, forcing most to relocate to the south, near Sidon. []

In our view, Assad will not compromise on the demand for the return of the Golan Heights to full Syrian sovereignty. The Embassy believes that every inch of Syrian territory ultimately will have to be returned for an agreement to be acceptable to Damascus. Within this concept, the Embassy adds that it has had indications that the Syrians are prepared to be reasonable concerning security arrangements and would accept long-term demilitarization with international guarantees. []

Many political observers believe that Assad feels a personal obligation and need to recover the Golan in his lifetime. The Embassy believes this is not necessarily true, although the Golan issue is intensely personal for Assad—he was Minister of Defense when the territory was lost to Israel in 1967. Conscious of his minority religious status in Syria—Assad is an Alawite and thus regarded as a heretic by many Sunni Muslims—he is in no position to trade away Syrian territory, nor will he enter negotiations unless he believes the Golan issue will be resolved in Syria's favor. []

US-Syrian Disconnect Over Peace

Assad has long been suspicious of US Middle East peace efforts, viewing them, according to the Embassy, as part of a strategy to isolate and "encircle" Syria through step-by-step tactics—Camp David for Egypt, the 17 May Accord for Lebanon, and a Hussein-Arafat coalition for Jordan and the West Bank. Foreign Minister Shara told Assistant Secretary Richard Murphy in 1985 that, in Syria's view, no US administration has ever proposed a truly just and comprehensive peace. []

[] Assad doubted the sincerity of US proposals presented in 1988, seeing them as designed solely to diminish the growing pressure on the Israeli Government resulting from the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza. According to the US Embassy in Damascus, senior Syrian officials were convinced the United States was attempting to rescue Israel from the uprising by holding out the prospect of a settlement to the Palestinians, hoping this would deflate the protest movement. []

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Heir to Salah al-Din

Nasir Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi is the preeminent folk hero to modern Syrians and Assad's principal historical role model. Assad sees himself as the spiritual heir to the Kurdish Ayyubid leader, the gentleman warrior who liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187. Assad often refers to this heroic figure, who is buried in Damascus, in describing the similarities between his own struggle against Israel and the Muslim victory over the Crusades. Visitors to Assad's office have commented on the large painting on the wall depicting the battle of Hittin, in which Salah al-Din defeated the Christian invaders and paved the way for the fall of Jerusalem.

Assad told Assistant Secretary Murphy in a meeting in 1986 that Syria would respond when it got a fair peace proposal. Assad's version of a fair proposal, however, is one in which the outcome is known before negotiations begin. Assad wants to know "up front" what the final agreement will look like. Only then is he ready to enter the process.

before Syria can accept US peace proposals, Washington first must provide assurances on the outcome on the basis of a unified Israeli position. Foreign Minister Shara and probably Assad himself are convinced that Syria can successfully refrain from taking a committed stance on any US proposal, as long as the United States has not obtained a unified response from Israeli leaders.

Following a visit to Damascus by Assistant Secretary Richard Murphy in September 1986, a commentary by Radio Damascus criticized the US approach to peace, pointing out that the "United States argues that an Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories, including the Golan Heights, can be one of the subjects at the direct

negotiations sought by Washington. But the United States does not commit itself to anything."

Assad is especially suspicious of US proposals for a phased negotiating process on the Palestinian issue. He fears that plans for a transition period, which he considers a cover for autonomy, might become permanent. According to the Embassy, Assad suspects that, even if the implementation of the transition phase is linked to the beginning of the final status negotiations, once autonomy is implemented, the Israelis would desert the final status negotiations. Thus, from Assad's perspective, the final status has to be agreed upon first, followed by negotiations to determine the process by which it would be implemented. The Embassy's view is that Assad believes the US approach will produce separate deals that maximize Israel's overwhelming military superiority and ensures that Israel and the United States will dictate the outcome. Ultimately, when such a scenario is played out, Syria will stand alone and be incapable of recovering its lost territory or affecting the outcome of a West Bank settlement through its own diplomatic means.

Despite Assad's temporizing on the peace issue, we believe he deeply fears being left out of negotiations. The Syrians may not want to play now, but the Embassy believes they have left the door open and Assad will be strongly tempted to participate in a process with real prospects for Syria to regain the Golan. Without such prospects, Assad's participation as a spoiler would be certain. The Embassy recognizes that getting Assad positively involved would not be easy but believes that it should not be ruled out as impossible.

Conference Modalities—Maximizing Syrian Influence
Whether or not he will take a seat in a peace conference, Assad's views on the mechanics of the process are evolving. In the past, he consistently has rejected formulations for direct negotiations with Israel. In the 20 April 1987 issue of *Time*, however,

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former President Carter stated that he was authorized by President Assad to affirm Syrian support for the concept of an international peace conference, that Syria would be pleased to attend, and that it was clear that many outstanding questions would have to be negotiated in direct talks between Israel and the particular nation involved. []

Although both Carter and King Hussein have indicated that Assad has agreed privately to the concept of bilateral committees within the framework of the conference, the Embassy in Damascus noted earlier this year that Assad had not repeated this willingness to Embassy officials. When pressed on the issue, Foreign Minister Shara has suggested that there was a place for committees but reminded the Embassy that the 1977 Geneva conference envisioned committees based on a topical, rather than a geographical, basis. []

The Syrians believe that Israel's 40-year-old demand for direct bilateral negotiations is based on an Israeli strategy to ignore the Palestinians and to change the Arab-Israeli conflict solely into a border question. Foreign Minister Shara has told US officials that, in Syria's view, once the border problems are solved, the Palestinians will lose Arab support and Israel would have achieved its goal of liquidating the Palestinian people. []

The Syrians have additional problems with bilateral geographical committees. The Embassy believes:

- They will be forced to deal 1 on 1 with the Israelis regarding the Golan, where they must deal from a position of inferiority.
- They see themselves being cut out of negotiations for the West Bank and Gaza and for Lebanon.

Should the Syrians ultimately accept bilateral committees, they will insist that the results of the individual committees do not stand on their own. Assad, thus, is insisting on a plenary body with veto power over agreements reached at the committee level. Otherwise, the Embassy points out, should the Jordanians and Palestinians or Lebanese negotiate an agreement with the Israelis while the Syrians do not, Damascus would be faced with another separate deal, this time under the auspices of an international conference. []

Assad's tactics regarding the composition of the Arab delegation appear to be evolving. Following the Egyptian peace treaty with Israel, Assad opposed the attendance of separate Arab delegations to a conference, fearing that a Camp David-style settlement would emerge leading to peace between Israel and Syria's Arab neighbors but leaving Syrian interests unaddressed. Assad sought to maximize Syrian influence—and veto power—by arguing for a single, joint Arab delegation. Assad still wants a joint delegation, but his remarks to former President Carter indicate a willingness to consider country delegations, although he is opposed to separate Palestinian representation. []

Assad's current maneuver to ensure Syrian predominance in the negotiating process is to advocate the establishment of functional committees—rather than bilateral exchanges—that would examine issues such as boundaries. The Embassy reported a remark by a senior presidential adviser that an international conference could have a subcommittee structure, with the Golan being dealt with in a "territories" subcommittee. The Embassy comments that Syria, in this preferred framework, would be involved in the discussion of other territorial issues, thus possibly gaining veto power. []

Steadfastness—The Correct Course

Since Sadat's trip to Jerusalem in November 1977, Syria has stressed that the proper strategy to confront Israel and Egypt's unilateral peace is steadfastness and confrontation. Assad has repeatedly called for an Arab alliance against Tel Aviv and Cairo that is steadfast in demanding a reversal of Camp David, Egypt's return to belligerency, and a tough line toward Israel. []

Since Assad began to demonstrate tactical flexibility toward the peace process a year and a half ago, regional events have helped to reinforce his hardline strategic position. Principal among these has been the Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) in the Israeli-occupied territories. Assad believes the uprising has vindicated

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Assad and Arafat—Longstanding Animosity

As Defense Minister in the late 1960s, Assad supervised Syria's backing for Yasir Arafat's fledgling Fatah movement and its early attacks on Israel. Even then, Assad sought to maximize Syrian control over the PLO and he briefly arrested Arafat in 1966. Since the war in 1967, Assad's drive to control the Arab confrontation with Israel has led to ups and downs in his relationship with Arafat:

- September 1970. Assad refused to support Palestinian forces fighting in Jordan even after Syrian ground units crossed the border. Without Syrian air cover, the PLO was smashed in Jordan.
- June 1976. Syrian military forces invaded Lebanon and attacked PLO positions in Beirut and Sidon. The Syrians supported the Christian Lebanese siege of the Tall az Za'tar refugee camp in Beirut in which hundreds of Palestinians died.
- November 1977. After Sadat's trip to Jerusalem, Syria and the PLO joined forces in creating the Steadfastness Front along with South Yemen, Libya, and Algeria.
- June 1982. Syrian and PLO forces fought together in Lebanon against the Israelis amid widespread recriminations between the two.
- November 1983. Syrian forces assisted Fatah rebels in their siege of Arafat's stronghold in Tripoli, Lebanon. Arafat was forced to flee to Cairo.
- 1986-87. Syrian-supported Shia Amal militiamen attacked PLO forces in refugee camps in Beirut, Tyre, and Sidon, killing over 3,000 people in the so-called Camps War. The fighting only stopped when the intifada in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza made it temporarily too embarrassing for Syria to back Amal.
- May 1988. Assad and Arafat met in Damascus after the funeral of Khalil Wazir, Arafat's deputy, widely believed to have been assassinated by Israel.
- July 1988. Syrian forces assisted Palestinian National Salvation Front forces in driving Fatah out of West Beirut's refugee camps. [REDACTED]

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his tough anti-Israeli stance by demonstrating the effectiveness of Arab steadfastness in challenging Israel. Syria was quick to support the *intifada* by setting up a clandestine radio station, al-Quds (Jerusalem), in southern Syria, which initially was very popular, according to the US Consulate in Jerusalem. For Assad, the seriousness of the threat posed to Israel by the *intifada* has been confirmed by US peace efforts, which Syrian officials have interpreted as a ploy to defuse the uprising and save Israel from potential Palestinian success. [REDACTED]

The Arab-Israeli peace process experienced its most serious jolt in years in July 1988, when Jordan's King Hussein announced Amman's divestiture of responsibility for the West Bank. The Embassy notes Damascus has cautiously supported the King's disengagement from Palestinian affairs, because he believes

that it further undermines the already slim chance of Arab-Israeli peace talks any time soon. Hussein's action, moreover, weighs heavily against separate peace talks between Israel and Jordan. [REDACTED]

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It is uncertain, however, if Assad can gain longer term advantage from Jordan's split with the PLO. Assad welcomes the damage to Arafat's credibility that he expects to result from the PLO's inability to adequately fill the vacuum on the West Bank, but Assad also fears that such a failure will force the PLO into greater dependence on Amman. We believe Assad will try to preserve the wedge between Jordan and the PLO by working closely with Jordan on Arab-Israeli issues to fuel Arafat's suspicions of Jordanian-Syrian collusion in an anti-PLO campaign. [REDACTED]

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The growing Arab consensus calling for Egypt's readmittance to the Arab fold also reinforces Assad's pursuit of a tough line in order to protect Syria's interests. In our view, Assad is concerned that Syria's regional influence would be challenged, and possibly eclipsed, if Egypt is readmitted to Arab councils. We believe, therefore, that Assad will seek to forestall Egypt's return to political center stage by keeping Arab attention focused on Palestinian issues and Egypt's "treason" in signing a separate peace. He will continue to support Egyptian oppositionists, like "Egypt's Revolution," which gets public Syrian backing, and to sponsor the radio station, Voice of Arab Egypt, which criticizes the peace treaty. The US Embassy in Damascus reported a conversation last year in which Assad told US officials he would even support an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Cairo if it would break the 1979 treaty. [redacted]

We expect Assad's focus on Israel will become even more acute with the implementation of the cease-fire between Iran and Iraq ending the war. Assad is concerned that Saddam Husayn's long-festered hatred for him will lead to an Iraqi campaign of subversion against the Syrian regime. In an editorial published in the Baghdad press in August 1988, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Taha Ramadan delivered a scathing attack on the Syrian regime and insulted Assad personally. The Embassy in Baghdad commented that the attack, coming from a source as high in the government and Ba'th Party as Ramadan, sent a clear message that Saddam has no intention of letting bygones be bygones. Assad probably will see his best defense against Iraqi subversion as a more aggressive campaign against Israel in which he will attempt to enlist and redirect Baghdad's energies.

[redacted]
Syrian fears over Iraqi intentions have already led to increased vigilance. [redacted]

[redacted] in July [redacted] the Syrian Army's Political Direction Administration had increased the frequency of compulsory political "lectures" given to nearly all active-duty members of the armed forces. The lectures vehemently attacked the Iraqi regime and called Iraqi President Saddam Husayn a tyrant, a traitor, a butcher, and a murderer. [redacted] many Syrian military personnel believe there is an increased threat of Iraqi subversion and believe the lectures are a direct result of the cease-fire agreement. [redacted]

Strategic Parity—The Military Option

Assad firmly believes that Israel will not negotiate an equitable settlement with the Arabs as long as Israel's military superiority is unchallenged. Assad told Secretary Murphy earlier this year that, without parity, Israel can continue to threaten war, "which means more dollars, arms, and expansion for it." In Assad's view, Israel has no incentive to make peace with the Arabs given its military strength and unswerving US support. By contrast, Assad believes parity will make peace possible and bluntly told Murphy that peace would have been possible years ago had it not been for US support for Israel. Assad, moreover, predicted to Murphy that when Syria obtained parity with Israel, the Israelis would want to withdraw, and the United States would bring American, rather than Israeli, proposals to Damascus. [redacted]

In Syria's view, a just and enduring solution in the region presupposes a strategic balance. Foreign Minister Shara told Murphy as long as the balance of forces between the Arabs and Israel was in Israel's favor, Israel would be encouraged to impose conditions on the Arabs. Shara added that parity does not mean only a military option—Syria does not want to encourage Israel to attack. Rather, in any settlement, Israel should not believe that because of its power it can dictate terms to the Arabs. In discussions with Assistant Secretary Murphy, Foreign Minister Shara warned that dangerous factors, such as missiles and chemical weapons, should provide impetus for discussion of means to expedite peace efforts. [redacted]

Syrian military planners are well aware that Syria cannot take on Israel in a full-scale war. The Embassy reports that repetitive official statements about the need to achieve parity and redress Syria's strategic weakness border on paranoia. In our judgment, Assad will continue to seek strategic parity and a greater capability to inflict damage on Israeli population centers to deter Israel from destroying Syria's economic infrastructure in the next war. Assad probably sees the development of a chemical warfare capability as his only path to achieving deterrence, and Syria is producing and stockpiling chemical munitions. The

economic difficulties during 1986 and 1987 forced a reduction in Syria's conventional arsenal and led Assad to accelerate the chemical weapons program.

Over the next two years, Syria is unlikely to resort to chemical weapons in response to Israeli provocations or to limited military engagements. In the event of all-out war, however, we believe Damascus would quickly employ its chemical arsenal in an attempt to neutralize Israel's overwhelming military advantage. If Syria delayed using its chemical weapons, Damascus would risk losing its chemical capability as a result of Israeli efforts to destroy these weapons as soon as conflict erupted.

Regaining the Golan Through War

We believe a quick Syrian grab for the Golan—even as a Sadat-style tactic to break the political logjam and start negotiations, is unlikely in the next two years. Assad is a long way from attaining strategic parity with Israel, and we believe Assad would like to postpone a showdown while building Syria's strength. It is possible, however, that if Assad believed economic and military problems were further eroding Syria's strength vis-a-vis Israel, he might be more inclined to gamble. Syrian offensive strategy would almost certainly be restricted to trying to seize the Golan, then holding on until superpower intervention and international bargaining resolve the issue in Syria's favor. Israel probably would escalate the conflict. Although the Israeli armed forces are vastly superior, Syria could inflict significant damage on the Israelis—including against Israeli population centers—because of improvements in the quality and size of Damascus's weapons inventory.



Figure 4. Assad was profoundly affected by Israeli actions following the Golan disengagement agreement, reached in March 1974. Withdrawing Israeli forces systematically destroyed Al Qunaytirah, the provincial capital. Assad ordered that the city not be rebuilt but remain a monument to Israel's implacable hatred for the Arabs.

Syria's economic problems interrupted its conventional military buildup, particularly in the ground forces, during 1986 and 1987. Although the military was generally insulated from Syria's economic austerity, the rapid expansion of the armed forces evident since 1982 has been curtailed. According to reports from acquisition of major equipment items has proceeded at a slower rate. Training during 1987 reached an alltime low, apparently because of shortages of petroleum and ammunition. In another cost-saving measure, Syria deactivated one brigade in a few Syrian divisions. Manpower expenditures were also reduced by forcing early retirements and canceling active-duty extensions.

The army's training regimen appeared to be back on track during 1988, and the quality of the training is improving. Damascus apparently is taking more seriously Soviet criticism that Syrian manpower and training, not Soviet equipment, are the military's most



Figure 5. During his speech opening the Syrian legislature on 27 February 1986, Assad counseled the citizens of the Golan not to fear "because 12 million Syrian citizens are able to take back the Golan there is no doubt about it, and if the Israelis are acting as if the Golan is within their borders, so we will act as if the Golan is in the middle of Syria and not at its borders. . . . History may write that the Golan was the high point of disaster for the Israelis [to the people of the Golan], we have an appointment to meet." [redacted]

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serious shortcomings. Training in 1988 indicates a better understanding of longstanding deficiencies in the military and will almost certainly improve Syrian capabilities, particularly in the air and air defense forces. [redacted]

[redacted] Nonetheless, Syrian training, in our view, remains unsophisticated and has yet to [redacted]

regularly incorporate combat air support, special forces, or even chemical defense into their conventional armored and mechanized training. [redacted]

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We agree with the Embassy assessment that the dissuasive factors for a Syrian attack greatly outweigh the persuasive ones at present. The Embassy points out that Assad has no reason to assume that the Israelis would fight a new war as a limited one, and previous defeats and the prospect of what he will lose if he attacks and fails must have a sobering effect. We believe another key dissuasive factor is Syrian uncertainty about the degree of Soviet support. Moreover, there is no significant internal pressure to regain the Golan by force, and the Embassy notes that every Syrian they have talked to, "down to the most illiterate peasant," displays great fear of war with Israel. [REDACTED]

Ultimately, as the Embassy points out, any analysis of Assad's offensive intentions turns on fundamental assumptions about his rationality and the degree of Soviet support. In our judgment, the defensive element continues to dominate Assad's strategic thinking for the moment. We believe that miscalculation on one or both sides remains the greatest danger to the uneasy peace that prevails between Syria and Israel. [REDACTED]

Challenging Israel in Lebanon

We believe that Lebanon will remain the principal battleground in Syria's confrontation with Israel. Assad has chosen to challenge Israel in South Lebanon, rather than on the Golan, in order to reduce the risk of open warfare with Israel, avoid losing Syrian lives in the conflict, and limit the prospects for Israeli retaliation against Syrian targets. Activism on the part of Lebanese and Palestinian Arabs, moreover, helps foster the perception of the universal and enduring nature of the Arab struggle against Israel and builds what Assad hopes will be irresistible pressure on Israel to come to terms with the Arabs. [REDACTED]

Damascus has sought to channel the energies of Lebanese and Palestinian groups, particularly the Shia fundamentalist Hizballah movement, into the confrontation with Israel and its surrogates in the security zone. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] 25X1

Damascus's ability to control events in South Lebanon is very limited, in our judgment. Its behavior indicates Syria wants to see Israel repulsed from Lebanon by force of arms, but recognizes that the confrontation with Israel could escalate beyond control on the heels of increased cross-border operations by Lebanese and Palestinian zealots. We believe Assad is counting on Syria's improved military capability and Damascus's link to Moscow to dissuade Israel from retaliating against Syria directly. Assad's brinksmanship in the south could backfire, possibly triggering another major Israeli incursion or longer term presence in southern Lebanon. [REDACTED] 25X1

Outlook

We believe Assad intends to put off negotiating with Israel for as long as possible, given his expectations that Syria's strategic position will improve over the long term. Assad sees the state of no-war/no-peace, as conducive to his efforts to maximize Damascus's regional influence and to develop Syria's military arsenal. Assad's most cherished dream is to regain the Golan, and the Embassy notes that the buildup of his military is being undertaken in part to that end. We believe Assad would prefer to achieve his goals short of war, although the recovery of the Golan is one of the central themes of Syrian foreign policy and Assad may elect to use force to accomplish this end. We believe that it is more likely, however, that Assad is gambling that a growing Syrian military threat—particularly the development of chemical weapons—will prompt the United States to "deliver" Israel into a peace process on Arab terms. [REDACTED] 25X1

We do not rule out that over time, if Assad perceives that domestic or regional problems have limited his military options, he may attempt to settle Syria's score with Israel diplomatically rather than through the threat of war. We doubt that Assad would enter [REDACTED] 25X1

constructive negotiations with Israel unless he was confident that major issues would be resolved on Syrian terms. He has not wavered from his bottom-line demand for the return of the Golan and resolution to the Palestinian problem. We do not envision circumstances under which Assad would abandon either goal or relax his insistence that these issues be addressed in tandem. []

We believe that, under almost any circumstances, Assad will have viable tactics to undermine moves toward peace that threaten or ignore Syrian interests. He has successfully demonstrated his ability in the past to use threats of subversion, military buildup, terrorism, and assassination to prevent Syria's weaker neighbors, Lebanon, Jordan and the PLO, from straying too far from the Syrian line. Syrian tactics could include the following:

- Assassinating senior PLO officials, possibly including Arafat, if the Palestinians seem prepared to enter into the peace process without Syria. Pro-Syrian Palestinian terrorists have been directly implicated in the assassination of moderate PLO leaders in the past.
- Assassinating other Arab leaders who might be willing to talk with Israel. Syria was almost certainly involved in the assassination of Lebanese Christian President-elect Bashir Gemayel in September 1982, whom the Syrians believed had promised to make peace with Tel Aviv.
- Sponsoring a major terrorist operation against an Israeli target by a Syrian-backed Palestinian or Lebanese group. Such an operation might be sufficient to further harden Israeli opinion against concessions to their Arab enemies or provoke a major Israeli retaliation that could sidetrack peace moves.

- Massing military forces on the Jordanian border to intimidate Amman. In 1980, Syria deployed several divisions along the frontier to pressure King Hussein during an Arab summit conference.
- Sparking unrest in Lebanon to derail peace moves. Syria could attack the pro-Israeli Lebanese Christian enclave north of Beirut to create a regional crisis and divert attention to the Lebanese arena if peace talks began without Syria.
- In extremis, targeting US diplomatic officials and installations to derail peace talks. The Syrians directly benefited, for example, from the attack on the US Embassy in Beirut in April 1983, which disrupted US moves to negotiate a Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement.
- In desperation, launch a limited military attack on the Golan Heights. []

Even if Assad could redress his grievances against Israel through negotiations, there is a downside to peace from Damascus's perspective. Much of Assad's regional influence—and traditional Arab aid—stems from Syria's role as the principal confrontation state with Israel. In an environment of peace, the Syrian giant would be cut down to size. Assad is not prepared to give up Syria's dominant role in inter-Arab politics or sacrifice his significant international status for the sake of peace, in our judgment. In an environment of nonbelligerence, Assad probably could compete with Egypt and Iraq for regional preeminence only if a peace settlement had been extracted from Israel on Syrian terms. []

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